Michael Mooney, 55, Author, Ex-Editor for Harper's, Dies

11/20/85 By Bart Barnes
Washington Post Staff Writer

Michael Macdonald Mooney, 55, a former Washington editor of Harper's magazine and an author whose subjects ranged from a suspense story about the Hindenburg disaster to a critical examination of the dispensing of federal funds for cultural projects, died of cancer Nov. 18 at his home in Washington.

Mr. Mooney, an adjunct professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, also had owned Network News, a Washington-based syndicate that folded in 1983.

As a young man he was an accomplished yachtsman who won a Gold Medal as a member of the 1948 U.S. Olympic team and a World Gold in 1973.

He was the author of eight books, which had been translated into 22 languages. Probably the best known was "The Hindenburg," a 1972 best-seller about the German airship that burst into flames while landing at Lakehurst Naval Station, N.J., in 1937 and burned in 32 seconds. Investigators never found a cause for the disaster, which claimed 36 lives, but Mr. Mooney's theory was that the airship had been deliberately sabotaged and that investigators had overlooked this possibility to avoid provoking an international incident.

The book became the basis for a 1976 motion picture starring George C. Scott that won three Academy Awards.

In "The Ministry of Culture," published in 1980, Mr. Mooney examined spending practices in the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He concluded that millions of dollars were being wasted on unworthy projects or dispensed on the basis of political favoritism.

Among his other books were "Momento," a novel about a socialite madam who managed debaucheries even from beyond the grave, and the critically acclaimed "George Catlin—Letters & Notes On The North American Indians."

Born in New York City, Mr. Mooney served in the Army and graduated from Georgetown University. He then was director of the National Review from 1957 to 1963, and a senior editor at The Saturday Evening Post from 1963 to 1969. He joined Harper's as a contributing editor in 1969, and then moved to Washington from Easthampton, N.Y., when he became Washington editor of Harper's in 1978.

In 1981 Mr. Mooney left Harper's and formed Network News, where he served as editor until the news service folded 2½ years later. Among the writers for Network News were Nat Hentoff and Tom Wolfe. The syndicate sold stories and articles to newspapers all over the country, including The Washington Post, The Miami Herald and The Chicago Tribune. It also served a number of smaller newspapers through a distribution agreement with United Press International.

Mr. Mooney's first marriage to Nancy L. Mooney ended in divorce.

He is survived by his wife, Ann Sears Mooney of Washington; three sons of his first marriage, Michael M. Jr., of New York, Laird A., of San Diego, and Christopher B., of Pittsburgh; a daughter, Nell B., of Washington; two sisters, Martha Jane McGrath of London and Patricia Anderson of Potomac, and two brothers, James D. and John Burns Mooney, both of Oyster Bay, N.Y.

MICHAEL MACDONALD MOONEY